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This Existential Life: It's Not About Cigarettes and Black Berets

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ABSTRACT

Try not to cast existentialism aside prematurely. Although often misbranded as the philosophy of egocentric, chain-smoking melodramatics, when given the careful attention it deserves, existential philosophy proves to be more empowering and hopeful than anything else. Existential questions – questions of meaning and purpose – are central not only to the major questions in philosophy, but to the particular individual's daily existence, as well. Confronting these questions and becoming a reflective, autonomous being proves to be an extraordinary task, but one that is essential in order to create a colorful, self-chosen narrative.

This project delves into some of these pressing existential concerns through an independent study of classic philosophic texts, along with an active research investigation. Focusing on four of the main players in existential philosophy, I explore Kierkegaard's understanding of individuality, Nietzsche's concept of the will that allows one to continue on in a seemingly meaningless world, how to lead the authentic life Heidegger describes, and the notion of freedom according to Sartre. In addition to the written profiles on each topic, I have paired my academic study with a more intimate, human element by conducting interviews with a handful of individuals in an attempt to understand how each perceives her life and her place within the world. My hope is that these recorded interviews help to illustrate the respective existential concepts concretely, merging the more formal analysis with the lived experience.

Despite the fact that the central concern of this project stems from the thoughts of four dead European men (a demographic I have become very familiar with as a philosophy major), their insights remain both inspiring and timely. Each of these thinkers provide a vehicle for self-awareness – a way for the individual to pull herself out of and away from the humdrum of her daily routine, the societal norms, and the external pressures – in order to freely carve out a path of her own. From country songs urging listeners to "Live like you were dying!" to tank tops with messages like "Be yourself" and "Follow your dreams!" splashed across the front, all too often these original existential concepts are diminished to cliché slogans. The mission of this project is to revive the radicalness of these four thinkers, for the messages they project are much louder than anything that could ever be reduced to a bumper sticker.

I. INTRODUCTION

From Prince Hamlet contemplating his life in the famous “to be or not to be” monologue, to the Little Mermaid’s yearning for something other than a life in the sea, existential themes can be found in many different areas of life. This prevalence probably has something to do with the fact that existential questions – questions of meaning and of the lived human experience – apply to every single individual on the most personal level. Whether each individual is aware of or interested in these existential matters though, is another question entirely.

The first thing any reader should know about this project (and one of the most important things I have learned on this journey) is that existential questions are difficult to confront. And while these types of questions can force someone to uncomfortably squirm in her seat, they can also be easily avoided during the daily grind. As I approach graduation and the start of my life as a REAL, LIVE adult, existentialism seems, to me, to be a very fitting philosophy to examine. The questions I have chosen to pursue are central to creating a meaningful life and are ones that I should be consciously asking myself as I continue to carve my path and make my place within the world.

In this essay I consider four major areas of existential philosophy: how one is able to achieve individuality according to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche’s concept of the will that allows one to continue on in a seemingly meaningless world, what it means to live an authentic life as described by Heidegger, and Sartre’s idea of freedom. I have given each philosopher his own section in my discussion where I tease out his thoughts on the

respective topic, analyzing the classic text in a way that is accessible for both myself and hopefully for my reader, as well.

In addition to these four sections, I have conducted and filmed interviews with five individuals of varying ages and backgrounds in which we discuss these existential concepts. The interviews (which were condensed into a short montage) allowed me to understand just how challenging these existential questions are to confront and respond to, especially in the form of spoken dialogue. My hope was that the interviews would help illustrate these existential struggles concretely, and for me, they have done just that.

Between my academic study of these four existential concepts and the interviews, my aim with this project has been to gain a solid understanding of how we, as individuals, view our place within the world and create meaning for ourselves. More than anything, I wanted this project to be useful for me; I wanted it to be both real and accessible. As a philosophy major, I constantly strive to find the most applicable and livable aspects of any philosophy, and as existentialism is a philosophy concerned entirely with the lived experience, understanding how these concepts can be applied is no issue. Living and abiding by these philosophies, as we will see, proves to be a bit more challenging.

II. KIERKEGAARD ON INDIVIDUALITY

From an early age, we are taught to value individuality – the great United States of America: a melting pot, a tossed salad, a country full of diverse, interesting individuals who are to be valued for what each brings to the table. We are constantly

reminded, “You can do whatever you want to do!” and “You can be whoever you want to be!” But what does it truly mean *to be* an individual? And how are we to come to an awareness of ourselves as existing individuals?

For Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, becoming and remaining an individual is an active process; it requires a continuous commitment. His concept of individuality is much more serious than the run of the mill American understanding – to be an individual takes more than sporting crazy clothes or dying one’s hair electric blue. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard refers to this individuality as “subjectivity” and asserts that it can be achieved by establishing a “proper relationship to Christianity” (Kierkegaard, 1992: 33). In order to understand what exactly this proper relationship entails, Kierkegaard makes an important distinction between the objective and subjective truth of Christianity. Concerning the individual and her eternal happiness, the objective truth of the content of Christianity is insignificant; whether doctrines like the Holy Scriptures check out historically and are completely reliable, for instance, should not be regarded as important to the individual. Instead, it is the subjective relationship with God – *how* the individual relates herself to this truth – that is key.

Kierkegaard explains that when we look at anything, Christianity included, from an objective point of view, we observe in a disinterested manner without any relation to ourselves. He writes, “The inquiring, philosophical and learned researcher raises the question of the truth, but not the subjective truth, i.e., the truth as appropriated. The inquiring researcher is interested, but he is not infinitely,

personally and passionately interested in a way that relates to his own eternal happiness to this truth”(Kierkegaard, 1992: 34). It is only when we begin our examination in a subjective manner that we become truly engaged; we become personally invested, and in turn, the experience or the relationship becomes much more meaningful. When an individual is infinitely invested she becomes so completely consumed with the truth – in Kierkegaard’s case, the subjective relationship with God – that she cannot even imagine her life without this element present. This relationship gives value to her life in a way that nothing else does and becomes an essential part of her very being.

When we relate subjectively to Christianity, faith is allowed to flourish, and for Kierkegaard, this concept of faith – a passionate belief and commitment – is absolutely crucial for an individual’s existence. In the presence of objectivity, faith vanishes; there is no risk, no leap required in regards to what is established with certainty. The individual is no longer given the option to devote herself to Christianity – she must simply *accept* the objective, factual content of the religion, while the decision to passionately commit to God (along with the risk this decision entails) is eliminated. Kierkegaard explains, “As soon as one takes subjectivity away – and with it subjectivity’s passion – and with passion the infinite concern – it becomes impossible to make a decision – either with regard to this problem or any other; for every decision, every genuine decision, is subjective action”(Kierkegaard, 1992: 36). Without decision, the individual’s active participation is stolen from her, along with her self-awareness. Taken objectively, there is no passion required to

sustain the individual's relationship with God, an appeal to objective reason is enough justification in itself. It is the very *lack* of rational foundation for the belief in God that requires the believer to make the personal, passionate decision to commit.

Kierkegaard writes, "Whereas faith had uncertainty as a useful teacher, it now finds that certainty is its most dangerous enemy. Take passion away and faith disappears, for certainty and passion are incompatible" (Kierkegaard, 1992: 35). So we see that this doubt, this uncertainty, is absolutely essential for faith, passion, and ultimately for the individual herself to exist.

Behind this objective uncertainty lies a paradox that the individual must embrace wholeheartedly. This paradox is the idea that the eternal truth, which for Kierkegaard is God, can be related to the existing, temporal individual; God becomes both temporal and eternal at once. While the subjective individual realizes the paradoxical nature present here, she remains entirely willing to devote herself and her life to her belief in God regardless. Though neither the eternal truth nor the individual are paradoxical on their own, when the two come into relation with each other paradox is born. In order to live subjectively and embrace this paradox, the individual must suspend reason and instead commit herself to this seemingly absurd belief. Kierkegaard explains,

Subjectivity culminates in passion. Christianity is the paradox: paradox and passion belong together as a perfect match, and the paradox is perfectly suited to one whose situation is to be in the extremity of existence. Indeed, there never has been found in all the world two lovers more suited to each other than passion and paradox, and the strife between them is a lover's quarrel, when they argue about

which one first aroused the other's passion. And so it is here.
 The existing individual by means of the paradox has come to
 the extremity of existence. (Kierkegaard, 1992: 43)

Because of this paradoxical nature, reason cannot help secure the individual's belief in God, however, faith accompanied by passion *can*. When the individual chooses to proudly embrace this paradox – which Kierkegaard believes to be based on the greatest degree of uncertainty – she is able to achieve the greatest inwardness, and in turn, the greatest subjectivity. Looking at this concept outside of its relation to Christianity, an individual's passion for and commitment to her truth regardless of the uncertainty is very important and can be applied to any truth that the subjective individual encounters.

Kierkegaard's call for subjectivity places him completely against rationalism and the systematic philosophies of his time. By bringing the individual into philosophy, Kierkegaard helped develop fresh ways of thinking about the world and the individual's place within it. The philosophies he starkly opposed, like German philosopher Hegel's, first of all, maintained that reality consists of pure, eternal absolutes. In this sense, the individual seeks philosophical truth through reason alone, by acquiring knowledge and understanding this objective reality as it is – universal, unchanging, and essentially, cold. The individual, who brings many different contexts and experiences into the picture – is largely left out of this view. How dull. Kierkegaard refuses to view reality in this way; instead, he believes true reality is related to the existing individual – it does not leave the individual out, but instead places her at the center of truth.

While Kierkegaard would have maintained that this happiness could be found in a subjective relationship with God, I think it can very easily be applied to other aspects of life, as well – namely, whatever it is that makes one, as an individual, sincerely happy and fulfilled. What drives us to act, of course, is our striving for eternal happiness, our desire to create meaning. Although Kierkegaard's philosophy is tightly tied to Christianity, there is a valuable message behind his thoughts that anyone – from a religious zealot to the most militant atheist – can benefit from. From his writing we gain a sense that our true task in life is to find, as individuals, what it is that we are passionate about and commit ourselves to that cause. Kierkegaard writes, "Only in subjectivity is there decision and commitment, so that to seek this in objectivity is to be in error. It is the passion of infinity that brings forth decisiveness, not its content, for its content is precisely itself. In this manner the subjective *how* and subjectivity are the truth"(Kierkegaard, 1992: 40). To me, this means we must devote our lives to that which we find so incredibly important that we could no longer imagine living without. Living subjectivity, living in accordance with one's individuality, is about making decisions, taking leaps, and pursuing whatever it is that one feels intense passion for. It is absolutely crucial to highlight those two words "intense passion" here, for Kierkegaard means that in order to become subjective, the individual must not merely pursue her truth, but devote herself to this truth *entirely*.

I think most of us truly want to live this way, but sometimes we may become too wrapped up in the rat race of life and forget what it means to be an individual.

We become too busy, too absent-minded, and lose sight of what it is that gives value to life. In doing this, we may fail to realize that we are holding ourselves back from exploring and ultimately discovering our respective truths in life. How is it possible to passionately commit to a truth that we have not even encountered? Once we experience a taste of our very own truth, whether it is something like a love for creating music and the dream of becoming a rock star or the commitment to Zen Buddhism, it has a way of creeping in and completely shaking up our world, leaving us unable to break away from it. It becomes so unimaginable to deny the truth that we are compelled to engage with it wholeheartedly, regardless of the risks and obstacles that it may present. I think what Kierkegaard is calling for is the exact opposite of the safety and resignation that the everyday world presents to us. I believe his philosophy encourages us to courageously leave this comfort zone behind and embrace the uncertainty that lies ahead. With all this in mind it becomes much easier to understand that living as an individual is no easy task, but I would venture to say that it is always more fulfilling than remaining a listless character in the story of life.

III. NIETZSCHE ON THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE WILL TO POWER

The future of philosophy was completely changed when Nietzsche proclaimed the three little words, “God is dead” (Nietzsche, 1992a: 99). With this – which at first glance may seem only like a frightening, atheistic declaration – Nietzsche is not crying out the literal death of God, but the death of what God

represents, the world of absolute truths, an objective guide to how one should live. This death is the implication of our waving goodbye to all objective values and hello to a newfound freedom to choose and create our own. The thought that humanity is no longer chained to a value system that God commands, while liberating, can also seem incredibly intimidating. Similar to Kierkegaard's aim to do away with all objective systems, with the death of God the individual finds that she is no longer able to safely retreat to an absolute, untouchable set of morals. Where Kierkegaard affirms the Christian truth and believes the individual must maintain a subjective relationship with God in order to reach self-awareness, Nietzsche has made a way for her to take full responsibility for carving her own path in this world, for choosing how to live, how to create meaning. The question that naturally follows from Nietzsche's declaration of God's death is *how exactly shall we go about this newfound freedom?* With an infinite number of choices and no guiding objective moral code, are we left completely alone to wander aimlessly? To begin our discussion, allow me to very simply explain our two options in responding to this new situation: either we shudder or we rejoice.

Change can certainly be scary, especially when the entire system of beliefs one has grown so accustomed to is *completely* called into question. When we are suddenly granted the unlimited freedom to challenge current values and create anew, Nietzsche claims that not many people will see the beauty in this opportunity – it will take a certain individual to recognize how wonderfully empowering this situation can be. He writes,

Indeed, we philosophers and 'free spirits' feel, when we hear the news that 'the old god is dead,' as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of the knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again, perhaps there has never yet been such an 'open sea. (Nietzsche, 1992a: 103)

Others though, maybe even the vast majority, will fall victim to the ways of the past, clinging to the aged truths of the dead God, holding on to the values that have (consciously or subconsciously) been drilled into our heads. Nietzsche asks, "How many people know how to observe something? Of the few who do, how many observe themselves?" (Nietzsche, 1992a: 99). It takes a strong individual to look inside herself and question her beliefs, her morals, and the foundations upon which they lie. Whether it be out of ignorance, fear, or pure laziness, we often forget to critically examine and instead simply appeal to what is known, succumbing to the influences of how we were raised or the commonly held view society maintains.

So we see that in order to take advantage of this freedom the individual must be brave in confronting herself and in inspecting everything for which she stands. She must question whether her beliefs are products of her independent doing, or if she is simply appealing to the factors that lay both in and outside of her – from family, to friends, to society in general – pressuring her to act a certain way or maintain a certain set of beliefs. Nietzsche urges us to,

Let us therefore *limit* ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the *creation of our new tables*

of what is good, and let us stop brooding about the “moral value of our actions”! We, however, *want to become those we are* – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.
(Nietzsche, 1992a: 101)

In doing this, the individual must step out of her safety zone and challenge norms, and while this will prove a difficult task, it is *essential* in order to further the development as a consciously existing self. How then, does one set herself in this direction? How does she master this new seemingly chaotic and purposeless world to create her own values? To move from here is to begin on the path to self-realization.

In order to overcome this issue of a freedom that appears to be restricted, we turn to Nietzsche’s idea of the will to power. While Kierkegaard looks to Christianity, Nietzsche’s utilizes the will to power as a vehicle for the individual’s progression towards the awareness of self. For Nietzsche, the will, or the instinct for power, is the motivating force behind all action, and if employed successfully, can enable an individual to create her own set of values within the world. In explaining the role of power, Nietzsche writes, “Life as a special case strives after a *maximal feeling of power*; essentially a striving for more power; striving is nothing other than striving for power”(Nietzsche, 1992b: 106). Although the word “power” is sometimes accompanied with a negative connotation, as if it is solely some dominating, malicious force, Nietzsche’s concept of power is a bit different. For him, power is not so much about the political, economic, social, or physical influence one attains, it is about the strength to overcome obstacles and advance as an individual – the power

to keep on, the power to stand out. The will to power is about our continuous striving to become more, hopefully resulting in the mastery of self.

Continuing with this explanation of the will to power, it is important to note that while the individual *may* exert her will over others, the ultimate goal is to exert one's will entirely upon herself in order to conquer all that stands in her way of achieving self-mastery. Nietzsche explains that the will to power, which we use as a means to attain individual distinction, can result in the individual's domination of others – namely, the weak. While the goal of the will to power is not to prey on the weak (for this, Nietzsche explains, is actually an exercise of those who lack power), these acts may aid in the accomplishment of the ultimate goal of self-mastery. However, it is only when the individual turns her efforts inside, challenging herself alone, she is able to achieve the highest level of the will to power, and in turn, the highest level of happiness. To do this though, is no easy task; it requires risk, tough skin, and an even tougher mind.

This idea of the extraordinarily independent and strong-minded individual is something like an entirely new race Nietzsche creates – the overman. The overman is the individual who is able to successfully employ her will to power and master the self, and in doing so, she sets herself above the herd, above humanity.

Nietzsche writes, “What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment”(Nietzsche, 1992c: 112). The overman successfully conquers the obstacles that stand in her way of achieving her goals. She is able to

create purpose totally independent of the distractions and pressures of others or society. I think this concept of Nietzsche's, and probably many other concepts within existential philosophies, require a serious degree of self-regard and confidence. I do not believe that these feelings will necessarily lead to an arrogance or some sort of evil selfishness, but instead will allow the individual feel empowered and inspired by the choices she makes and the meaning she has created within her life.

In closing, I believe it is important to keep in mind that, similar to Kierkegaard's concept of renewing one's faith and continually committing to the individual's passion, Nietzsche's will to power also requires an active commitment on the part of the individual. When goals are accomplished, new goals must be set. There are certain factors that could prevent an individual from fostering her own self-mastery, ranging from the external influences like family and society, to the internal influence of pure passion, but if the individual's will is strong enough, she will conquer. Nietzsche, like Kierkegaard, acknowledges that it is no easy feat to live as an individual, only the strong-minded are up for this challenge. When we become responsible for ourselves, for all of our decisions and actions, it can be terrifying, yes, but it can also prove to be the most liberating and exciting experience. As Nietzsche writes,

For believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is – to live *dangerously!* Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Be robbers and conquerors as long as you cannot be rulers and possessors, you seekers of knowledge! Soon the age will be past when you could be content to live hidden in forests like shy deer. (Nietzsche, 1992d: 102)

No longer should we feel obligated to live up to certain expectations or a duty to obey, we now have the freedom to break out and explore independently. It is the individual's responsibility to decide whether she will remain a silent sheep among the herd or rise above.

IV. HEIDEGGER ON AUTHENTICITY

On a daily basis, how many of us consider the possibility of our very demise? Every time we hop in a car or casually jog around the neighborhood, is there any contemplation of dropping dead at the given moment? While certainly not the most pleasant topic, for German philosopher Martin Heidegger, fully confronting and embracing the possibility of death is an essential ingredient in how one relates to her existence within the world. In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains that there are various ways an individual can perceive death, each of which have a certain effect on the individual's perception of her living existence.

The phenomenon of death is central to Heidegger's philosophy because it "individualizes" human beings, or what Heidegger refers to as "Dasein", from the objects of the world that are "ready-at-hand" (the objects that we, as humans, create and which have a fixed essence– anything from chairs to coffee cups) and those that are "present-at-hand" (the objects that exist in nature, which are independent of humans – like stars and air). Similarly, the possibility of the individual's death distinguishes her from *other human beings*, as well. Since, as a society, we tend to be defined by our roles, it seems as though one person can easily be replaced by

another who is capable of performing the same task. As a teacher, a consumer, a student, a pizza delivery boy – whatever the role may be, there are plenty more individuals capable of stepping in and substituting at any given moment. However, Heidegger asserts that when the individual considers her very own death in an *authentic* manner, she becomes self-aware of her individuality, her irreplaceability.

He explains,

...this possibility of representing breaks down completely if the issue is one of representing the possibility-of-Being which makes up Dasein's coming to an end, and which, as such, gives to it its wholeness. *No one can take the Other's dying away from him.* (Heidegger, 1992: 182)

When the individual confronts the possibility of her death, she understands she is more than her actions and more than these external labels or roles that she performs. This realization separates her as a unique entity, and in a sense, allows her to understand herself as the active agent within her life.

Unfortunately, there are certain factors and pressures in life that interfere with an individual's ability to achieve this self-awareness; death is not always perceived in a way that encourages one to grasp the full potential of her being. There are various modes of understanding how the possibility of death relates to and impacts an individual's living existence. On one hand, because death is an inevitable event in every person's life, Heidegger explains that we can come to perceive it objectively in the context of the lives of others. Each individual has some sort of experience with this phenomenon, whether it is the death of her grandmother, a friend, or even a fictional character from a novel. The problem arises when the

individual fails to grapple with the possibility of her *own* death and the fact that it is both certain and indefinite – meaning that it will unquestionably happen and could occur at *any* moment. Heidegger explains that this sort of cavalier attitude toward death is a symptom of “everydayness”; in the hustle and bustle of life, we fail to recognize that death is always possible as the ultimate possibility, and in fact, we do quite a lot to avoid this confrontation. We resort to and rely on “idle talk”, which is more or less meaningless, cushioned chatter that allows us to continue dancing around the pressing concerns in life, like the possibility of one’s very own death, for instance. So many of our interactions in everydayness consist of idle talk – from the constant status updates on Facebook, to the unrefined tweets splayed across twitter, we allow our minds to be filled with words and thoughts that carry no depth. Our interactions become superficial and hollow. While dwelling in this everydayness the self is thoughtlessly sucked into what Heidegger refers to as the “they”, where each becomes a faceless entity in the crowd instead of a distinguished being.

In this overwhelming mass of the “they”, conversation and interpretation – even regarding death – is reduced to a public, impersonal opinion. Instead of understanding her death as that which individualizes her, the individual views death as a fact of life, and while it is bound to happen at some point, death is nothing to worry about for the time being. Situated in the non-reflective “they”, one flees any true confrontation with the thought of her final possibility. It is understandable how this art of avoidance is mastered within the “they” because death certainly is a frightening possibility to face. The “they” provides a sense of security, a sense of

comfort for the individual. Heidegger explains this problem regarding death in such impersonal terms here,

By such ambiguity, Dasein puts itself in the position of losing itself in the “they” as regards a distinctive potentiality-for-Being which belongs to Dasein’s ownmost Self. The “they” gives its approval, and aggravates the *temptation* to cover up from oneself one’s ownmost Being-toward-death. This evasive concealment in the face of death dominates everydayness so stubbornly that, in Being with one another, the ‘neighbors’ often still keep talking the ‘dying person’ into the belief that he will escape death and soon return to the tranquilized everydayness of the world of his concern. Such ‘solicitude’ is meant to ‘console’ him. It insists upon bringing him back into Dasein, while in addition it helps him to keep his ownmost non-relational possibility-of-Being completely concealed. In this manner the ‘they’ provides a *constant tranquilization about death*. At bottom, however, this is tranquilization not only for him who is ‘dying’ but just as much for those who ‘console’ him. (Heidegger, 1992: 185)

We have a tendency to distance ourselves from death (sometimes even when it is staring us square in the face) and in the end, this results in distancing ourselves from *life* in and of itself. We assign death this quality of indefiniteness, almost as if we can deceive ourselves into thinking that maybe, just maybe, if we refrain from contemplating this final possibility in any concrete way, then we can avoid it altogether. In everydayness, the individual allows herself to put death off into the far future – until she is ready – as if there is no true threat in the possibility of death...as if maybe it isn’t really a possibility at all.

There is no chance of escaping death though, and avoiding this fact has implications that span far and wide, affecting the very way in which the individual relates to her existence and involves herself within the world. By standing within

the “they” in everydayness, we jeopardize the life and the freedom we are granted and live without any true sense of urgency or passion. Heidegger explains that this mode of life resemblances a sort of *falling* towards the end. Once the individual is thrown into the world she is instantly positioned toward death, but in the sense that she is *falling* toward it, she emulates the role of a helpless creature who is swept away with the current, never truly gripping the potential that her life offers. For Heidegger, all this amounts to an *inauthentic* way of understanding death, and in turn, an inauthentic way of experiencing life. The inauthentic individual views her existence as a collection of fixed circumstances that result in a sort of limited future. While she may believe that she has the freedom and the ability to make decisions and progress, this freedom is only within the context of the established narrative she has been living. The question then is how the individual is to overcome this mindset that manifests in the “they” and lead a more authentic life. The solution stems from one little, yet fierce word – *anxiety*.

Rather than fearing or avoiding the possibility of death, we must embrace this state-of-mind that Heidegger refers to as “anxiety”. Anxiety is central in allowing the individual to confront the possibility of her annihilation, and in turn, helps her to exist more authentically. Heidegger writes,

*...anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned **freedom towards death** – a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the “they”, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious.*
(Heidegger, 1992: 194)

The authentic individual understands the phenomenon of death for its existential relevance, and thus she becomes both empowered and motivated, clearing her mind of the distractions of the “they” and instead focusing on creating a personal, genuine sense of self. Using Heidegger’s language, the authentic individual does not become a “free-floating ‘I’”, taking advantage of *every* possibility she encounters, but maintains a clear, self-chosen idea of what she would like to achieve and is conscious of how her decisions will affect the future she aims to construct. The authentic individual does not take her freedom lightly or make decisions on a whim; she is reflective and cautious, yet determined.

By anticipating death and thus living authentically, the individual chooses to create a meaningful, adventurous existence. Her narrative becomes both colorful and coherent, reflecting the path that she has carved out for herself. The mastermind behind Apple, Steve Jobs, sums up this concept during a commencement speech in 2005 after being diagnosed with cancer. He shares with the graduates, “Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.” When the individual loses herself in the “they”, to these external forces that Jobs mentions, she loses the power and drive that an authentic life requires. So often we allow ourselves to be swept away with the monotony of life;

we become complacent, accepting our everyday routines and never push ourselves further. Heidegger (along with Mr. Jobs) reminds us that we must not live in fear or lethargy; we must live with a real vigor, with a sense of zeal! Life is precious and it is fleeting, so why waste it mulling around in everydayness, engaging in idle chatter and concerning ourselves with matters void of meaning? For me, I know that as I leave the University of Rhode Island come May to continue on my journey, I will heed my school's motto to "Think Big" and I'll raise 'em one – I'll make sure that I *do* big, as well.

V. SARTRE ON FREEDOM

As we have seen with each of the previous existential thinkers, freedom has been a recurring theme throughout their respective philosophies, and as we turn to French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre it should be no surprise that freedom will again be a star in the show. For Sartre, freedom is not taken lightly; an individual's freedom (when realized) is the main factor in her ability to create a meaningful existence. In this section we will consider Sartre's concept of freedom from his *Being and Nothingness*, looking specifically at how one is to become conscious of her freedom and why so often individuals fail to achieve this self-awareness. Sartre's commitment to freedom is both impressive and invigorating – that is, if the individual is willing to open both her eyes and her arms to embrace it.

According to Sartre, the way in which an individual becomes conscious of her freedom is through anguish. Anguish, which Sartre refers to as the

“manifestation of freedom” (Sartre, 1992: 260), is related solely to the individual and her power; anguish is her response to her personal situation and the world in which she lives. To further explain this concept, Sartre makes a sharp distinction between anguish and fear, writing, “A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation” (Sartre, 1992: 256). When an individual is in anguish (unlike when she is fearful), she realizes that she has a sense of control. While she cannot control all external factors and circumstances that are placed upon her, in anguish she becomes conscious of the fact that she has the ability to control *herself* and her response to whatever she may encounter. Although I did not choose to be born as the eldest daughter to a working-class family in Rhode Island (these are circumstances that are beyond my control), how I view my life and involve myself within this world *is* my choice. Rather than viewing myself as an inactive object upon which things simply happen *to*, through anguish I recognize myself as an active agent, and thus realize I have the authority to conduct myself in whichever way I deem appropriate from here on out.

In addition, this state of anguish affects how one understands oneself in terms of one’s past, present, and future. Since the individual apprehends that she is able to act and react however she chooses in anguish, we see that she is completely free in the present. While her past is an important and inescapable aspect of her being, her present and future are in no way fixed or determined by the past. In this state of detachment from both the past and future, anguish allows the individual to

understand that the decisions she makes in the present are decisions that she is alone in and wholly responsible for. While Sartre notes an individual's past, present, and future as separate temporal periods, he does not divide her in terms of three distinct stages or selves. The individual is constituted by all three of these realms – she is a connected whole, but not in the sense that her past decisions necessarily determine her in the present or in the future.

It is important not to misconstrue Sartre's explanation of this independence that one has from both one's past and future. The individual is related to her past in the sense that her past is her essence – it helps identify her and establishes a sort of character. While my present actions make sense and can be understood only in relation to my past, nothing from the past can determine or guarantee a certain decision or action in the present. Because of this link, it is crucial to be aware of the fact that one's past is, in fact, significant and therefore the decisions I have made (and make now) affect my present (and will affect my future). While I am never controlled by my past or my future in the present moment, how I decide to live – my present actions and decisions – *do* matter very much so. For me, being a college student who is committed to her future, this is a comforting thought. Throughout high school and college I have chosen to live in a way that, in my opinion, has granted me many wonderful opportunities and I can only hope to continue on with this pattern into the future. Throughout the years I have created a path for myself, a path that I must continually recreate and commit myself to. For example, there have been times this semester where I've been confronted with the choice between staying in

and slaving over this paper for my honors project or kicking back and shooting the breeze with friends. When faced with these choices, nothing in my past *determines* the final decision I make in that moment, but personally, I may choose to *consider* my past and understand my decision in terms of where I have been (I have invested much time into this endeavor and feel that is worthwhile) and where I plan to go (to hopefully give a killer presentation at the Honors Research Day on May 2nd). So while in this case my decisions do make sense in the context of my past and future, I think Sartre would say that there would be no reason for me to live out of context either. At any moment I have the ability to shake myself up and out of all this and operate in a completely different manner; I have no reason to uphold anything, like completing this project, unless I choose to do so out of my very freedom.

Considering that the discovery of anguish is what allows an individual to become aware of her freedom, it makes sense that this uncovering would be desirable, at least in Sartre's eyes. Unfortunately though, as we have seen with the each of the previous philosophies, this sort of self-realization is no cakewalk. Similar to Heidegger's concept of anxiety, there are certain circumstances and factors that mask anguish (which is present in every individual, though not always realized).

One deterrent in achieving this consciousness is simply the habitual actions we fall into throughout the daily grind. For the most part, we act more like non-reflective robots than free humans, allowing ourselves to perceive the actions of life as facts that necessarily belong there, facts that we are chained to. To illustrate this point Sartre writes,

The alarm which rings in the morning refers to the possibility of my going to work, which is *my* possibility. But to apprehend the summons of the alarm as a summons is to get up. Therefore the very act of getting up is reassuring, for it eludes the question, 'Is work *my* possibility?'

Consequently it does not put me in the position to apprehend the possibility of quietism, of refusing to work, and finally the possibility of refusing the world and the possibility of death. In short, to the extent that I apprehend the meaning of the ringing, I am already up at its summons; this apprehension guarantees me against the anguished intuition that it is I who confer on the alarm clock its exigency – I and I alone. (Sartre, 1992: 261)

In this sort of outlook, we drag through life on autopilot, sticking to our everyday routines without ever pausing to question whether what we are doing is what we *choose* – without even considering the other possibilities. When we hear the alarm clock, it is as if we are programmed to groggily rise from bed and begin the day as we do every other without any thought at all given to these actions. In allowing this sort of disconnected, complacent mindset, we risk the loss of a life that is meaningful and engaging, one where we freely create and exist in a way that we feel in control of.

Although Sartre provides a few additional ways in which society attempts to avoid anguish, I would like to examine just one more explanation that I find particularly relevant to the philosophies we have been examining. In addition to living a habitual, *seemingly* fixed life, Sartre explains that an individual can attempt to steer clear of anguish by appealing to “everyday morality” (Sartre, 1992: 261). In this case, the individual may deceive herself into thinking that she is forced to act a certain way or make a certain decision based on the traditional viewpoints that have been accepted for so long. She chooses to falsely believe that these “rules” are

objective and therefore she is not free to act or decide against them, so she simply abides. In the following excerpt, Sartre powerfully sums up this idea, where he begins by discussing those who *do not* become conscious of their freedom and simply obey,

For the rest, there exist concretely alarm clocks, signboards, tax forms, policemen, so many guard rails against anguish.

But as soon as the enterprise is held at a distance from me, as soon as I am referred to myself because I must await myself in the future, then I discover myself suddenly as the one who gives meaning to the alarm clock, the one who by a signboard forbids himself to walk on a flower bed or on the lawn, the one from whom the boss's order borrow its urgency, the one who decides the interest of the book which he is writing, the one who finally makes the values exist in order to determine his action by their demands. I emerge alone and in anguish confronting the unique and original project which constitutes my being; all the barriers, all the guard rails collapse nihilated by the consciousness of my freedom. I do not have nor can I have recourse to any value against the fact that it is I who sustain values in being.

Nothing can ensure me against myself, cut off from the world and from my essence by this nothingness which I *am*.

I have to realize the meaning of the world and of my essence; I make my decision concerning them – without justification and without excuse. (Sartre, 1992: 262)

Looking back to the godless, meaningless world that Nietzsche describes where the individual must question all values and freely adhere to her own, we see that Sartre's view of freedom is very similar. Once the individual becomes conscious of her freedom, she begins to determine her values independently in order to give her life significance.

Despite the obstacles that stand in her way, if the individual *is* able to realize her freedom, this makes her life all that much more difficult. How could

freedom ever make someone's life more difficult, you might ask? Well the gift of freedom comes with a high cost – complete and utter responsibility for one's life. For an individual, knowing that she is entirely in control of her life can be a heavy burden to bear. She is held wholly accountable in her decision-making and understands that her life is her own to create – if she is unsatisfied with the fashion in which it is unraveling, she has the power to change it. If she is unhappy or bored with the life she is leading, she can no longer scapegoat the blame on anyone or anything else; she comes to realize that the state of her existence is the result of herself and herself alone. When one finally comes to terms with this, perceiving herself as a free being, she is able to understand that all the components of her daily life that she has come to accept as facts – her job, her routine, and her attitude she has towards the elements of her life – are all within her control. While it is true that we cannot control *everything* that happens in life (we cannot demand to be given a certain job, for example, there *are* factors that are out of our hands in some cases), we certainly have the ability to work towards whatever it is we want, we are free to pursue (or not pursue) anything we want. Never should we feel utterly stuck in a situation, for as Sartre points out, we are always free.

Although the consciousness of freedom places a serious responsibility on the individual, if understood and embraced in its fullest, this realization grants one the opportunity to sit in the driver's seat throughout the journey of life. It forces the individual to look around and evaluate everything with which she knows and does, and if she decides she wants to make a positive change, she must work to accomplish

that. This self-awareness forces the individual to perceive her decisions as monumental in determining the trajectory of her lived project. At its very core, life is about the decisions one makes. My question is, why waste precious time living a life that you feel completely despondent towards? Why throw away forty years working a job you hate, or in a situation that you constantly feel stifled by? Thanks to Sartre, we learn that we are never truly obligated or trapped in any situation. If you do not like an aspect (multiple aspects, or even *all* aspects) of your life, you possess the power to make a change. Whatever you do though, do not complain, for the ball is always in your court.

VI. INTERVIEWS: THE INDIVIDUAL'S TAKE

The issues discussed above, though originally written about many decades ago, remain (and I believe will always remain) relevant to any individual's life. After reading these existential philosophies, I felt it was only fitting to try to understand how the respective concepts fit into the lives of people today. As individuals, we each have constant story lines composed of our views, goals, feelings, and influences running throughout our lives, and I wanted to highlight this uniqueness with each of my interview subjects. My aim for this entire project has been to gain an accessible and relatable understanding of how we, as individuals, create meaning for ourselves, and I believe these interviews reinforced this understanding for me.

Philosophy is something that should be shared and lived, and I wanted this element to be alive in my examination of existential philosophy. I think there is something very powerful about considering these sorts of life questions concerning

individuality, meaning, authenticity, and freedom. The discussions I had with my subjects were intended to stir something within each of them, and hopefully within my viewer, as well. The questions that I contemplate throughout my project are questions that we should all be in tune with; we should continuously examine ourselves and our lives in order to ensure that we are each leading a genuine, fulfilling existence.

Ultimately I chose to interview five very different individuals: Ellie (a high school freshman living with her mother and father), Steven (a college student who was raised in an extremely conservative, Catholic household in Rhode Island now lives on his own in Boston), Mel (a Central Falls native and first-generation college student graduating from the University of Rhode Island in May), Ed (a husband, father, and self-employed contractor), and James (an 81-year-old retired businessman). Because I chose subjects of varying ages and circumstances, it was interesting to see the differing sorts of responses I received on questions about concepts like death and self-created meaning. Ellie, the fourteen-year-old high school freshman, for example, had a very different take on freedom than James, my grandfather.

Not only did I learn more about my subjects after forcing them to consider and verbally convey their own existential views, but this exercise also allowed me to grasp how difficult it is to lead the existential life that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre have described. While not every response I drew from my subjects would satisfy the existential thinkers I consider throughout this paper, these interviews help illustrate why it is so challenging to achieve that truly existential state – to live as an individual, to

power through in a seemingly meaningless world, to lead an authentic life, and to realize our freedom. As difficult as it may be, confronting these issues are absolutely essential to create any true sense of meaning in life.

As a student studying philosophy, I've have had my fair share of new ideas enter my brain and totally alter my view of the world. These existential concepts in particular have really taken over my thoughts this semester and have begun to transform the way I view myself, my life, and my future. As I look back on all that I have been introduced to throughout this project, I feel both a great sense of responsibility and empowerment. I will carry what I have uncovered this semester with me throughout my life – hopefully avoiding any major quarter or mid-life crises in the future.

Special thanks to Professor Eske Møllgard for putting up with and guiding me throughout this endeavor. Thanks for lending me your expertise in the field, helping me grasp what these thinkers meant in their philosophies without influencing my interpretation too greatly. You let me do my own thing (with some nudges along the way), and I appreciate it.

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